Country Code Standards are Changing, Impacting Interoperability and Information Sharing

Posted by Walt Okon, DoD Senior Architect Engineer on Tuesday, November 13, 2012

The U.S. Federal Government has been identifying different country locations using a two-character code based on a standard known as the Federal Information Processing Standard (FIPS) 10-4 [1]. The FIPS 10-4 standard was identified to be replaced by the open standard International Standards Organization (ISO) 3166 [2]. The United States organizations are transitioning to the ***Geopolitical Entities, Names, and Codes (GENC)*** standard, a profile of the ISO 3166. The transition to the new GENC Standard will have impact on everything from birth certificates, passports, and medical records to personal navigation systems, i.e., any system or standard that includes a country identifier.

Although ISO 3166 supports both two- and three-character codes, there are conflicts between the FIPS 10-4 two-character codes and the ISO 3166-1 two-character codes that prohibit an easy transition. So the U.S. Government is moving to three-character codes. Changing from two to three characters, especially in legacy systems, requires a significant transition period and not all historical data can be moved into a new paradigm.

What?s Being Done

To address this large-scale country code transition effort, government agencies are working together to make sure valuable data can be transferred without having to re-work agency-specific architecture(s). The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) is leading the Country Codes Working Group [3] (CCWG), a Federal Government forum for coordinating country code requirements, maintaining the GENC, and adhering to the additional guidance from the Board of Geographical Names.

The first draft of this standard is available on the National System for Geospatial Intelligence (NSG) Registry [4] and includes the standard, code list, and an initial XML schema. There are plans to federate availability of this standard with the DoD Data and Services Environment (DSE) and the IC Enterprise Registry and Repository (ER2). Additionally, Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) will provide an initial mediation service by the end of 2013 to the DoD and IC enterprises. How to provide the mediation service on unclassified networks and to other federal entities are yet to be resolved.

For more information on the upcoming change or to get involved, contact the Country Codes Working Group [3].

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Links:

[1] http://www.itl.nist.gov/fipspubs/fip10-4.htm

[2] http://www.iso.org/iso/country_codes.htm

[3] http://www.gwg.nga.mil/ccwg.php

[4] https://nsgreg.nga.mil/registers.jsp